

The Speciesism of Leaving Nature Alone, and the Theoretical Case for “Wildlife Anti-Natalism”

Sentient beings should be granted moral consideration based on their sentience and nothing else. Fortunately, most of us now seem to realize this when it comes to humans: the sentience of human individuals alone implies that they should be granted full moral consideration. Neither their intelligence, gender, nor race is relevant. What we have yet to acknowledge, however, is that there is no justification for not extending this insight to non-human beings too. Discriminating against individuals based on their species membership is no more justified than discriminating against individuals based on their race or gender. In other words, *speciesism must be rejected*.¹ From this simple starting point – that speciesism is indefensible – the indefensibility of refusing to help non-human beings in nature follows quite directly, as such a refusal is transparently speciesist.

The Speciesism of Non-Intervention

The speciesism of leaving alone non-human beings who suffer in nature is not difficult to see if we turn our attention to the case of humans subjected to the torments of nature. For when it comes to humans, we realize that we have an obligation to help individuals who suffer from natural ills such as starvation and disease, regardless of whether humans played any role in bringing these conditions about. Not only is it not wrong to help humans who suffer from these ills, it is wrong not to do so. Consider, for example, the case of smallpox: given that we were able to eradicate this horrible disease and save people from the suffering and death it caused, we clearly should. Withholding the cure would be beyond cruel. The same holds true in the case of humans who are being eaten by predators. If a man is about to be eaten by lions, and we are able to interrupt this horrible event, we clearly should.²

¹ For an elaborate case for why speciesism must be rejected, see Vinding 2015a.

² The following link shows pictures of the situation I am here describing (contains disturbing images): <http://www.abolitionist.com/reprogramming/maneaters.html>

So we generally realize that we should help humans who suffer from such natural horrors, yet in the case of non-human beings who suffer from the exact same ills – starving to death, suffering from diseases, being eaten alive, etc. – we not only fail to realize that we have similar obligations, but even tend to consider it normative *not* to do anything to help. This indifference and inaction with regard to the suffering of non-human beings in nature cannot be considered anything but speciesist – discrimination against non-human beings merely because they are not human. And given the indefensibility of speciesism, it follows that we must reject this grossly discriminatory position. It follows that we can no more defend allowing non-human beings to suffer from ills like starvation, disease, and predation than we can defend allowing these horrors to befall humans.

Zooming in on Predation

The problem of predation is often the sole focus of discussions concerning the problem of suffering in nature, so it seems worth taking a closer look at this particular problem. It must be remembered, however, that this problem is only a subset of the much larger problem that is suffering in nature. Even if one could rid the world of predation by the wave of a magic wand, suffering would still be endemic in nature due to other horrors such as starvation, disease, and parasitism.

For reasons I shall not speculate on here, many people, including people who show great concern for non-human beings, passionately defend predators and their “right” to kill and eat other sentient beings. The main argument is almost always that predators' lives depend on killing and eating other beings, and thus their killing is justified. This argument is curious to say the least, since the same argument could be made with equal force in the opposite direction, namely in defense of the predator's victim. If the lion does not kill, s/he will not survive, but if the antelope does not avoid getting killed, s/he will obviously not survive either. It is a symmetrical situation, so why do we take the predator's side by default? And if one takes a closer look, it becomes clear that it is in fact

It can seem out of place and unfair to refer to such material, yet if one is to think seriously about this situation and the larger problem of suffering in nature, the very least one can do is to look at (a single instance of) the reality of this situation. In order to dispute the claim that we should interrupt and prevent predators from eating humans, I submit that one must at the very least be able to look at the footage linked to above while doing it.

Charges of unfairness in this context are wholly misguided. If anything is unfair, it is to look away from the horrors of nature, and to then insist that such horrors should not be interrupted or prevented. To defend the horrors of nature with closed eyes is no better than defending humanity's exploitation and torture of non-human beings with closed eyes. It is no better than defending factory farms while refusing to see pictures from them.

not a symmetrical situation at all. For the one-to-one picture presented above is of course far too rosy and by far understates the real number of victims a lion – or any other predator – will kill in reality. The more accurate picture is that if the lion kills, s/he survives another week or two, and then s/he will have to kill again. If we keep this fact in mind, and then as an example take a successful lion who can manage to survive life in nature for more than five years, we see that the ethical dilemma is in fact not between one lion who gets to live versus one antelope who gets to live, but rather between one lion versus more than a hundred antelopes (or zebras or monkeys or warthogs) who get to live.³

So the question again arises, this time with more than a hundred times the force: why indeed do we favor and defend the killing by, and thus survival of, the lion by default? If we believe in the equal value of individual lives and in weighing equal interests equally – or anything just remotely close to that – how can we possibly defend the survival of a predator if it happens at the cost of unspeakably horrible deaths of countless beings of equal value to her- or himself?

But what should we do about predators, then? In order to think more clearly about the problem of predation, and to get beyond the speciesist biases we may have in favoring some species over others, it may be worth phrasing the problem in terms of human beings only. If we imagine there are some humans who cannot make moral decisions – i.e. they are not moral agents we can reason with – and that these humans cannot survive unless they eat at least one other human every week, we have reformulated the problem of predation in terms that should help us think about it beyond the influence of our speciesist biases. We can then ask: can we really defend not doing anything about this situation? Can we defend letting these humans go out and kill another human of choice every week? Or should we prevent them from killing humans, and instead provide them with cruelty-free substitutes for the human flesh they otherwise need in order to survive?

It should be clear that the latter is by far the superior solution, and, given that we must reject speciesism, this does not change when we revert back to the same problem involving non-human beings rather than humans. If it were possible, it would clearly be much better to provide cruelty-free food for predators than to let them torment, kill, and eat other sentient beings.

³ For an estimate of how many beings a lion needs to kill in order to live, see Sunquist & Sunquist 2002, p 292. An adult lioness requires 5 kilograms of flesh per day, and an impala weighs about 30 kilograms, which means a lion would need to kill more than one impala a week in order to survive (Ibid).

Wildlife Anti-Natalism

As noted above, we can no more defend allowing non-human beings to suffer from ills like starvation, disease, and predation than we can defend allowing these horrors to befall humans. To maintain that we should not intervene in order to prevent or mitigate such horrors when we can, is to maintain a speciesist position.⁴ The question that naturally arises, then, is how we can best reduce harms like these, if we can at all. This is a difficult and open question, and extensive research is no doubt required in order for us to give qualified answers. Nonetheless, I shall here briefly present one possible answer – a tentative conjecture – that I think is worth taking seriously, namely to prevent the births of non-human beings in nature, a position one might refer to as “wildlife anti-natalism.”

This is a controversial idea for sure, not least because it goes against our current consensus about nature and our obligations toward it, namely that we must do what we can to preserve nature as it is.⁵ Yet appealing to common consensus will not suffice to refute my conjecture. Rather, in order to make a fair evaluation of it, we must take a sober look at the arguments for and against it.

Anti-natalism is the ethical position that procreation is always bad. It is a position that has been defended by various authors in recent times, the foremost of these being philosopher David Benatar, who in his book *Better Never to Have Been* argues that coming into existence is always a harm (Benatar 2006). Benatar’s main argument rests on the asymmetry between 1) coming into existence, which involves suffering and pleasure, which are bad and good respectively, and 2) not coming into existence, which involves neither suffering nor pleasure, the absence of these being good and *not* bad respectively. In other words, there is nothing bad about someone not coming into existence, but there is something good about it, namely the absence of suffering, whereas coming into existence *does* involve something bad: the presence of suffering. Benatar also argues for his conclusion based on another asymmetry, namely an asymmetry in magnitude between the suffering and pleasure in

⁴ For a more elaborate argument for this conclusion, see Vinding 2015a.

⁵ For a criticism of this view, and an argument for why it is inherently speciesist, see the chapter ‘The Conservationist Delusion’ in Vinding 2015a.

life, which, Benatar argues, implies that even the very best of lives are still very bad, a reality we are not keen to acknowledge due to an optimism bias inherent to our psychology (Benatar 2006, pp. 60-92).

The current literature on anti-natalism, including the work of Benatar, focuses almost exclusively on human procreation, and thus says precious little about “wildlife anti-natalism” in particular, although Benatar makes clear that his argument favors it (Benatar 2006, p. 2). This must be considered a missed opportunity for anti-natalists for at least two reasons: 1) because non-human beings in nature comprise the vast majority of sentient beings on the planet, more than 99 percent of them,⁶ and 2) because, regardless of how strong one thinks the case for anti-natalism is in the human context, the argument for an anti-natalist conclusion is much stronger when it comes to non-human beings in nature. Indeed, one need not even argue for a novel stance on procreation in order to make the case that anti-natalism is normative with respect to (most) non-human beings in nature; one need only reject speciesism. Hence, although in favor of the conjecture I present here, I shall not defend, nor rely on, the arguments of Benatar or other anti-natalists in order to make this argument. I shall merely rely on the premise that speciesism should be rejected.

The reason one need not argue for radical positions on procreation in order to make the case for wildlife anti-natalism is, in a nutshell, that life in nature is extremely bad. In fact, it is so bad that even the most conservative position on human procreation would, if applied without speciesist compromise to the circumstance of non-human beings in nature, recommend wildlife anti-natalism, at least for the vast majority. The perhaps most obvious way to see that this is the case is by considering the reality of survival rates in nature. For example, only about one in eight male lion cubs survive into adulthood; the rest of them succumb to ills such as starvation, illnesses, and, quite commonly, the teeth and claws of other lions (Main 2013). It would be dishonest to claim that the act of bringing a being, or eight beings, into this circumstance of male infanticide, or early death by other means, would be considered permissible on any accepted view of human procreation. It wouldn't. And yet the survival rate of lions does not constitute anything remotely close to a representative example of the survival rates of most non-human beings in nature, as mammals generally have the highest survival rates of all classes of animal species in terms of reaching adulthood. A more representative example would be fish.⁷ A female chinook salmon, for instance,

⁶ See <http://reducing-suffering.org/how-many-wild-animals-are-there/>

⁷ The reason that they comprise a more representative example is that fish constitute the biggest group of vertebrates in terms of the number of individuals – they outnumber mammals by at least ten times, and likely more than 100 (Tomasik

usually lays more than five thousand eggs, more than half of which hatch as small younglings called alevins, and out of these thousands of young fish, only about 20 will survive to reach adulthood (Quinn 2005, p. 254).

Out of more than 2,000 small sentient individuals, less than 20 survive into adulthood, a survival rate of less than one in 100.⁸ Again, we will have to admit that on no accepted view, much less any plausible view, of the ethics of human procreation could such survival rates ever be deemed excusable in the human context. We all realize that bringing a being, or 2,000 beings, into existence with such dire prospects – death before adulthood being a virtual certainty for any randomly chosen individual – is ethically unacceptable insofar as humans are concerned. How, then, can it be considered anything but speciesist to accept these monstrous odds in the case of non-human beings? It can't.

One could in fact make the same argument without reference to these dismal survival rates. Because even if we focus only on the “lucky” beings who do survive into adulthood, and look only at their quality of life, we reach the same conclusion: these lives are not worth starting on any non-speciesist ethic of procreation given their extreme badness. However, I shall not make such an argument here, mainly because there is no need to; focusing only on the relatively few individuals who survive to adulthood is an indefensibly narrow focus, as it wholly discounts the lives of the majority of non-human beings, those who never make it to adulthood. That would be discrimination for which there is no defense.⁹ The premature death of the vast majority of non-human beings in nature more than suffices to establish that (at least most) lives in nature are so bad that no non-speciesist ethic of procreation could possibly allow them to start, at least not for their own sake.¹⁰

2009/2015a). If we also take invertebrates into account, the biggest group of non-human beings on Earth by far, the average number of offspring that dies shortly after birth becomes greater still, as they tend to have an even higher number of younglings who die shortly after they are brought into existence.

⁸ And notice that it is more than 2,000 who survive to the so-called fry stage, a stage at which the denial of sentience is virtually tantamount to denying fish sentience altogether.

⁹ For a glimpse into just some of the evils that life in nature entails for even the luckiest of beings, see Tomasik 2009/2015b.

¹⁰ And premature death surely must be counted as something that makes a life bad.

It seems worth making a few clarifications about the argument I have made above. First, it should go without saying that my argument does not support the killing of non-human beings in nature. Indeed, the argument above rests upon the badness of the harm of premature death, and it is that very harm (along with many others, of course) that would be precluded by the birth prevention that any non-speciesist ethic of procreation prescribes. Imposing the harm of premature death obviously does not prevent or undo the harm of premature death.

Confusion about this matter tends to result from a failure to distinguish between 1) a life worth starting and 2) a life worth continuing, which are by no means the same (cf. Benatar 2006, pp. 22-28). For example, it is one thing to say that one would not want to be born as an alevin who will live with a 99 percent risk of dying before adulthood (as I take it most of us can admit we wouldn't), but it is another thing entirely to say that one would not want to survive and make it to adulthood if one already had been born as such an alevin; after all, one would then have been born to want and struggle for that more than anything.

It is also worth making clear that the conjecture I have argued for above is mainly a theoretical rather than a practical one. That is, my argument holds that, other things being equal, it would be better if (at least most) non-human beings in nature were prevented from being brought into existence (as merely adopting a non-speciesist ethic of procreation reveals), but it says nothing about how to implement such existence prevention in practice, or the degree to which it is at all practically realizable. These latter questions are open questions that require much research, and such research is vitally necessary. For if one acts without researching these questions carefully enough, an attempt to prevent bad lives in nature could well end up causing more harm than it prevents, for instance by actually increasing the number of sentient beings who are brought into the world only to live short and miserable lives. Thus, the purpose of my argument is in no way to encourage reckless and premature actions, but, again, simply to make the case that it would be better if (at least) most non-human beings in nature were prevented from coming into existence, and to encourage both discussion of this controversial claim and research into the degree to which such prevention is practically realizable. It is in this sense that what I have argued for above is a conjecture: it is an idea whose validity in practice is highly uncertain, and which further research must clarify.

Objections to Wildlife Anti-Natalism

It may be objected that wildlife anti-natalism would also be a speciesist position, in the sense that it can only be realized in practice by us humans, not the non-human beings themselves, and yet we would not deem it permissible to forcefully prevent humans from giving birth to lives we deem unacceptable. So how can such a totalitarian course of action be deemed normative in the case of non-human beings?

It is important to maintain a sense of proportion here, however. True, we do not support forceful sterilization of humans for the purpose of preventing them from bringing short miserable lives to the world, but there are relevant differences, an important one being that the survival rate of human children is nowhere close to the survival rate, in terms of reaching adulthood, of the vast majority of non-human beings in nature. And the extremely low survival rate of most non-human beings is one of the main reasons their birth is impermissible on any non-speciesist ethic of human procreation.

So am I saying that we would forcefully prevent humans from procreating if the prospects of their children were anything close to that of most non-human beings? Here we have another relevant difference between human and non-human beings, namely that we would not need to do anything by force in the former case. Most compassionate parents would be able to appreciate that they should not have a child if that child faces a seven in eight risk of dying before reaching adulthood, much less if the risk is 99 in 100, or worse still. No force would be needed.

So in order to make this an accurate analogy, the human parents in question would have to live in circumstances, or have some genetic condition, that would mean that their children would face extraordinarily bad chances of reaching adulthood – such as a one in a hundred chance, or even “just” a one in eight chance – *and* it would have to be impossible to convince them to use birth control. Should we not intervene in that hypothetical case? Anyone who says “no” is, I maintain, guilty of not taking seriously the victims whom these parents are sure to create. I am not saying this scenario is not deeply problematic, and for many reasons, yet passivity cannot reasonably be considered within the bounds of ethical permissibility. That would amount to a total indifference toward human life, the kind of indifference we normally only reserve for non-human beings.

Another objection one may employ in order to reject the indefensibility of allowing non-human beings to procreate under circumstances that guarantee an early death for the vast majority of the newborn beings, is to claim that we cannot reasonably compare the survival rates of non-human beings with those of humans. We cannot hold non-human beings to our anthropocentric standards of what is acceptable with respect to risk and procreation. This is a deeply problematic claim, however, as it implies that we should hold non-human individuals to a lower standard when it comes to risk and the concern we show for their lives than we should in the case of humans. To say that it is okay for non-human beings to face a 99 percent risk of dying before adulthood, but that it is not okay in the case of humans is inescapably a speciesist position, a position that shows less concern for non-human individuals merely because they are not human.

Furthermore, the claim is also problematic in that it would seem to entail that humans are justified in exploiting and killing non-human beings if they only do it in these same “permissible” numbers. That is, if one maintains that a 99 percent risk of death before adulthood is acceptable for certain species, then this implies that humans are justified in bringing individuals of that species into existence, as long as they make sure that for every 100 individuals they bring into existence, at least one will become a free-living adult; they are free to kill and eat the rest. One may then object that there is a relevant difference between 99 salmon dying in nature and 99 salmon dying by the hands of humans, but on what exactly would such an objection be based? Certainly not, I would suggest, the perspective of the non-human beings themselves. This leads us to a discussion about a view that many of us seem victim to, namely that what happens in nature is normative.

Our Dogmatic Defense of Nature

It seems widely presumed that what goes on in nature is somehow normative, or at least not bad. Yet what justification can be given for this widespread presumption? What justification is there for saying that, say, the birth and brutal death of 2,000 non-human beings in nature is any less bad than the birth and brutal death of 2,000 non-human beings in human captivity? I suggest there is none. The non-human individual who is born to live a brief life that is ended brutally does not care whether that end is brought to her or him by human hands or by the jaws of a predator. Our confused reverence here is not so unlike the bizarre rationalization one often hears from “hunters”

about how much they respect the individuals whom they kill, which is of course irrelevant since their “noble” intentions do not change the reality for the victims who are killed. When it comes to nature, it is as if we all agree to smear this rationalization out on nature as a whole. Non-human beings live horrible lives and die in brutal ways in nature, alright, but that is okay because it is nature, and nature does not have the exploitative intentions of humans. However, as is true in the case of the victims of human “hunters”, the intentions, or lack thereof, behind the events that result in beings who live horrible lives and suffer brutal deaths are irrelevant for the victims involved. It is just yet another manifestation of our inflated sense of self-importance that we think that only the suffering that humans impose really matters and is worth preventing. How did we come to accept such a twisted view? Just like the human “hunters”, we entirely overlook the perspective of the non-human beings who suffer in nature when we rush to defend the horrors of nature – not to mention our own dearly held preconceived notions – which is why our defense of nature has absolutely nothing to do with ethics. It is merely an exercise in ignoring the lives of non-human individuals and the tragic truth about what those lives entail. Indeed, it seems that no matter how bad life is in nature, no matter how much torturous horror one documents and presents, most of us are still eager to defend it – not so unlike those who will defend humanity’s exploitation of non-human beings regardless of how many atrocities one can point to that are routinely committed against them. “It is okay, because that is what society does” seems the basis of their attempt to defend the indefensible. Likewise, no matter how many of the tragic realities of life in nature we observe, it somehow must be okay, because nature has brought it about. A less than vacant defense.

Our dogmatic defense of nature and the suffering it entails most of all seems the product of a deep-seated bias toward favoring the status quo. As philosopher David Pearce notes: “For the most part, we are possessed by the deep unspoken feeling that “what has always been was always meant to be”. Status quo bias has deep cultural roots.” (Pearce 2011). For instance, if there were no beings suffering in nature, no births of sentient individuals of whom more than 99 percent must die before reaching adulthood, would we then have any obligation to bring such a condition into existence? This seems most dubious. If anything, it seems we would have a strong obligation *not* to create such a condition, which suggests that our defense of nature, and of leaving it alone, arises not from careful consideration, but merely from the circular notion that things should be the way they are because that is the way things are – again, not much unlike the most common rationalizations one hears in defense of our exploitation of non-human beings: “it’s natural”; “it’s necessary”; “it’s what

we have always done”; etc. In other words, it appears little more than an expression of status quo bias.

Again, as I hope stands clear, my aim with the preceding discussion has not been to encourage rushed interventions in nature, but instead to start a conversation about these issues, and to direct our broader conversation about these issues toward the core fundamentals: we need to question and debate the sanctity of nature altogether. We cannot allow ourselves to spuriously rationalize away the suffering that takes place in nature, and to forget the victims of the horrors of nature merely because that reality does not fit into our convenient moral theories, theories that ultimately just serve to make *us* feel consistent and good about ourselves in the face of an incomprehensibly bad reality.

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